

Fact Sheet
Impact of the Cerro Grande Fire on Los Alamos National Laboratory
June 1, 2000

- The Cerro Grande Fire burned nearly 48,000 acres in northern New Mexico between May 4, 2000 and May 21, 2000. The burned area includes about 9,000 acres (more than 30%) of the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) site.
- Infrastructure and Facility Damage
 - Recent fire-hazard-reduction efforts to thin and remove slash from forests near major Laboratory buildings minimized damage to the Laboratory from the fire; extensive fire-fighting during the event also kept fire from breaching any permanent structures.
 - Some vehicles and 39 structures – among them office trailers or modules, small shop/lab buildings, sheds, storage buildings, and transportainers—were destroyed. The extent of damage to 49 other structures, including some office modules, which are not habitable, is being assessed. The permanent structures that were severely damaged or destroyed were older wooden buildings.
 - About one hundred utility poles were destroyed at one technical area.
 - The effect of power outages, surges, water, smoke, and soot on scientific equipment is being assessed.
- Environmental Impact
 - Numerous and continuing measurements by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, New Mexico Environment Department, DOE, and LANL show no release of radiation beyond what is normal in any wildfire anywhere. Radiation levels at the recent Ruidoso Cree wildfire in southern New Mexico were 20% higher than those at Los Alamos.
 - Destruction of groundcover plus a thick layer of ash (which repels water) leaves the site very vulnerable to flooding and erosion during the upcoming rainy season. The Laboratory is part of the interagency Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) team's efforts to minimize environmental impacts from runoff. One concern relates to the likelihood of flooding in canyons and the possibility that contamination in the soil could be carried by the runoff. Mitigation steps are being planned with the BAER team.
- Programmatic Impact
 - The fire caused a two-week break in LANL operations and its important research—the first major closure in the Laboratory's 57-year history of service to the nation.
 - The security of LANL's nuclear and classified materials was maintained throughout the emergency.
 - Safely restoring the programmatic effort to pre-fire levels is LANL's top priority. Much work is expected to resume during the week of May 22.
- Human Impact
 - The 18,500 residents of Los Alamos County were evacuated for several days during the fire.
 - About 400 Los Alamos families, including about 270 Laboratory workers and retirees, lost homes in the blaze. The homes of 40 additional families were damaged.
 - The offices, computers, and scientific data of about 60 employees were destroyed.
 - Firefighting and Laboratory recovery efforts have maintained an excellent safety record to date, with no loss of life or serious injuries.
- Background
 - The fire was started by the National Park Service on May 4, 2000 as a prescribed burn intended to cover 300 acres in Bandelier National Monument, just southwest of the LANL site. The fire went out of control on May 5, 2000.
 - Hot temperatures and high winds during the following week caused it to spread extensively, burning parts of Los Alamos National Laboratory, neighboring Indian Land, the private Baca Land, Los Alamos residential areas, and the Santa Fe National Forest.
 - The Cerro Grande Fire is the largest in New Mexico in recorded history. It took 65 fire departments from New Mexico, more than 1100 fire fighters from national teams, numerous aircraft and heavy equipment, and four Type I National Fire Management Teams to get the fire under control. It is expected to continue burning at scattered hot spots for several weeks to months.
 - Los Alamos National Laboratory has a workforce of more than 10,000 people, including about 5,000 scientists and engineers.